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ABSTRACT

A recent study found that "mentioning," or saying just enough about a topic to allow for an assignment related to it, had supplanted instruction in reading comprehension in grades three through six. As a replacement to "mentioning," a "preteaching" unit has been developed that concentrates on development of textbook vocabulary, identifying students' concept levels, building a frame of reference using the students' vocabulary, and teaching cue words. All of these activities take place before a reading assignment is given and are not graded, thus relieving anxiety. In order for the teacher to know the problems the student will face in the materials to be presented, a careful examination of the materials must be made with regard to their difficulty, the different concepts presented, readability, and vocabulary. The types of vocabulary that should be defined are (1) technical, (2) general, (3) high frequency, (4) structurally difficult, (5) multiple meaning, and (6) the students' own vocabulary. Cue or signal words and connectives are also taught to aid in comprehension. For testing situations, the teacher shows students how to summarize, compare and contrast, or put into chronological order. Through different levels of questioning, a teacher can gradually bring students to an inferential reading level. Above all, students must be allowed adequate time to give well-thought-out answers during questioning sessions. (HTH)

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Improving Reading Comprehension

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BASIC SKILLS

Improving Reading Comprehension

The Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois has been asked by NIE to lay plans to improve reading comprehension in the elementary schools.

In order to determine what is being done in the classroom currently, a study was conducted in 39 classrooms in 14 school systems. Grades three through six were selected because it was assumed that more comprehension instruction takes place at those levels. Altogether, 17,997 minutes were spent in observing reading and social studies classes of the "best teachers" in each school.

At the end of the observation, it was discovered that comprehension was not taught at all during social studies classes and only 45 minutes out of a possible 11,587 minutes during reading time.

Delores Durkin, Professor of Education at the University of Illinois, reported on this study in Educational Leadership. She stated, "Based on the observations, 'mentioning' has supplanted instruction in grades three through six." ("Mentioning" is saying just enough about a topic to allow for an assignment related to it.)

Most of "mentioning" related more to the worksheets the children were required to do, and at no time were the children told why they were studying these topics nor how they related to reading.

Is it any wonder students flounder when they are faced with tasks they are not prepared for because they are asked to use skills they have not been taught.

I would like to suggest a procedure to replace "mentioning." It is the use of a pre-teaching unit. The pre-teaching unit would concentrate upon the

development of vocabulary from the textbook, identifying concept levels of the students, building a frame of reference using the students' vocabulary, and teaching cue words. All of these activities would take place before a reading assignment is given, and the activities would not be graded, thus relieving anxiety.

In order for the teacher to know the difficulties the student will face in the materials to be presented, a careful examination of the materials must be made. Several questions must be answered.

1. How difficult is the material to be read? Is it loaded with technical terms?
2. How many different concepts must the student have to function successfully in the material?
3. Are the questions at the end of the chapter pertinent to the focus of the teaching that will be done?

To determine the difficulty level of the material to be read, a readability scan can be done rather quickly. There are many readability formulas that can be used. Keep in mind that any readability formula will give the teacher an estimate only of the difficulty level.

Determining the density of concepts is a necessary procedure. The teacher will be able to focus upon the concepts that are absolutely necessary for all students to master before moving on to the next assignment. As the teacher does this step and looks at the questions at the end of the chapter, it can be a basis for differentiating assignments to accommodate the different achievement levels of the classroom.

As the teacher analyzes the material to be read, she/he identifies the various types of vocabulary it contains. Following is a list of the types of vocabulary which should be identified.

Technical vocabulary. This consists of terms which are usually found in one academic area and not in another, and which always have the same meaning. For instance, in a social studies map study lesson, the words "latitude" and "longitude" are technical terms.

General vocabulary. These terms always have the same meaning, but unlike the technical terms they may be found in many content areas. An example is the term "sequencing." Sequencing can be found in math, science, and social studies as well as health, literature and home economics. It always means to put into proper order.

High frequency terms. A technical term can be a high frequency term as well. In the study of land forms the term "contour" could appear frequently and it always has the same specific meaning.

Structurally difficult terms. For example, the word "transportation," because of its length and number of syllables, could be difficult for some students. It is better to anticipate potential difficulty than to let the student be defeated.

Terms with multiple meanings. These are among the most difficult to anticipate and identify. They generally are short words which the student can pronounce. They appear in any content area, and if the student doesn't know the meaning in a given context, comprehension could be lost. One of the best examples I've seen is the word "blaze". Many students have the picture in their minds of frontiersman setting fires as he "blazed a trail through the wilderness."

Students' own vocabulary. Give the students a term that will appear in the unit to be studied, and then ask them to give a word that first comes to mind when they hear or see that term. For example, the term "Civil War" will undoubtedly

elicit such responses as North, South, slavery, guns, battles, Lincoln, Lee, and so on. Using these words the teacher has the opportunity to set a frame of reference. She/he may help the students use these words to organize what they know about the Civil War. Using the words North and South as organizers, the students can group all the words they have listed under them. This exercise utilizes the skill of categorization. After the words are listed, an exercise in comparison and contrast can be developed.

Cue words or signal words. There are five types of signal words that occur frequently in all academic areas. Knowledge of these words and their particular messages can be very beneficial to the students.

1. Go signals: first, second, next, not only, but also, in addition, furthermore, likewise, at the same time.
2. Caution signals (generally conclusion and summary signals): thus, therefore, consequently, accordingly, in retrospect, in conclusion, in brief, as a result.
3. Turn signals (different point of view): but, yet, on the other hand, on the contrary, nevertheless, otherwise, despite, although, however.
4. Stop signals (special significance): undoubtedly, without question, significantly, hereafter, absolutely.
5. Relationship signals (connectives that denote relationship): (a) time—finally, when, while, soon; (b) space—beside, there, here; (c) cause and effect—because, since, so.

When teaching connectives the following strategies should be implemented:

1. Plan time for working on frequent and complex connectives in each subject area.
2. Along with direct instruction, incidental aid must be given on an individual basis because of the difficulty in handling certain abstract connections.

3. Instruction which is followed by wide reading permits students to meet connectives over and over, providing reinforcement.
4. All instruction must be done in relation to context.
5. Instruction must be followed by practice so that the students become effective and independent users of connectives as signals for meaning.

Testing vocabulary. This is the vocabulary the teacher uses in testing situations.

If a student is asked to define a term, the teacher should show him an acceptable way of defining a term. Many times the student fails to respond, not because the answer is unknown, but because the task is not understood. The student must be taught how to summarize, compare and/or contrast, list, put into chronological order, sequence, describe, and evaluate.

After the teacher has taught the different types of vocabulary, set the frame of reference, and given a purpose for reading, the actual assignment may be given.

The teacher will want to differentiate instruction through different levels of questioning. There should be some who, what, when and where questions for those students who can only cope with the literal level of questioning. This kind of questioning generally elicits a one-word answer. In order to begin to develop the students' answering process, the teacher's next question should be, "How did you know?" "What words gave you the clue?" As the teacher moves the student along to the inferential level, the questions will be "Why do you think...?" and "How did you know...?" For critical questioning the teacher can ask such questions as "What could have happened if...?" "How would you describe the

character of...?"

If the teacher is wondering about his/her level of questioning, it is helpful to tape a discussion session led by the teacher. Analyze the kinds of questions asked and consider how the level of questioning could be raised. Alternate questioning by teacher and student is often helpful in determining the level of questioning that has been set in the classroom. Students generally imitate the kinds of questions the teacher asks.

As the teacher listens to the tape, he/she should also note the amount of time given the student to respond. Is the student given time for a well-thought-out answer, or are a few words to get the question over with enough?

In 1969, Bartolome found that teachers asked an average of sixty-nine questions in a typical thirty-minute lesson. In 1975, Lucking reported that teachers asked 5.17 questions per minute. When the teacher considers that adults take about fourteen seconds to begin to respond to a question, the teacher should wonder about the fact that generally students are given 5.6 seconds to respond, and that teachers tend to allow two or three times as long for a bright child to respond as allowed for the less able student.

Question: how much time do you allow for your students to respond?